

# Immigration from Eastern Europe to Argentina at the Turn of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century

VÁCLAV ŠVEPEŠ

---

Institute of World History, Faculty of Arts, Charles University, Prague  
Nám. J. Palacha 2, 116 38 Praha, Czech Republic  
[svepesv@gmail.com](mailto:svepesv@gmail.com)

## Introduction

Immigration from Eastern Europe to Argentina at the turn of the 20<sup>th</sup> century was influenced by a number of events in Europe and Argentina, which contributed to the decision of thousands of people to emigrate to South America. The migration of Jews, Volga Germans, Poles, and Ukrainians to the area referred to in the title of this contribution was typical for the time. These nationalities populated the fertile pampas in mainland Argentina. Eastern Europe provided the third largest group of rural immigrants and farm operators.

The objective of this contribution is not to depict the statistics that focus on the wave of immigration to Argentina at the turn of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, but to respond to the question of the influence of immigrants from Eastern Europe, and the demographic, economic and social development of Argentina during this period. The inspiration for this was drawn from a number of publications and resources from the United States, Great Britain and Argentina.

## The Eastern European Footprint in Argentina at the Turn of the Century The Jews

The majority of the European Jewish population was concentrated in the west of tsarist Russia in the 19<sup>th</sup> century. These areas formed the Pale of Settlement within which Jews had to live. They were forbidden to live in the centre of Russia, including St. Petersburg and Moscow, except under the most stringent conditions. Jews were not legally permitted to own land. As a result, the

majority lived within the cities that formed the Pale of Settlement, as craftsmen, labourers or they became members of the middle class. Despite the mid-19<sup>th</sup> century liberalization, the Russian Empire began the policy of Russification in the 1880s: a cultural, and religious campaign, which conflicted with its multicultural character. The Ukrainian, Polish and Jewish population were the most affected. As a result, thousands began to flee the country.<sup>1</sup>

*Between 1882 and 1900, nearly one million Russian Jews fled, followed by two million more between 1901 and 1925. They emigrated to the United States of America, South Africa, Australia, Brazil and other countries, although a significant Jewish community also moved to Argentina.*<sup>2</sup> An enormous wave of Eastern European immigrants arrived in Latin America in the final decade of the 19<sup>th</sup> century before World War I. Statistics show that from 1881 to 1914, 113,000 mainly Russian Jews emigrated to Argentina, another 10,000 to Brazil and 4,000 more to the rest of the continent.<sup>3</sup>

Although the majority of the Jews arrived from territories of the Russian Empire, some also came from other countries. In the case of Argentina, there were four periods, or to be more precise, four major immigration waves. The first, between 1860 and 1885, consisted of individuals and families from Alsace, Lorraine, France and Western Europe, who settled in the cities. The second from 1889 to 1914, included immigrants from tsarist Russia, Poland, Romania, Hungary, Morocco, and Turkey. This immigration plan was partially subsidized. The third and fourth wave occurred in the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century.<sup>4</sup>

A leading figure in subsidized immigration was Baron von Hirsch, a successful businessman, originally from Bavaria, who founded the Jewish Colonization Association (JCA), one of the first highly organised and permanent immigration charitable institutions. An interesting fact is that the

---

<sup>1</sup> M. WINSBERG, *Jewish Agricultural Colonization in Argentina*, in: *Geographical Review*, Vol. 54, No. 4, 1964, p. 487.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibidem*.

<sup>3</sup> P. HOROWITZ, *Jews in Latin America: Past and Present. Facing Problems of Social Transformation*, in: *Jewish Currents*, Vol. 35, No. 8, 1981, pp. 6–7.

<sup>4</sup> S. EHREHAUS – M. GARRIDO, *La inmigración rusa en la Argentina*, Buenos Aires 2012, p. 17.

JCA immigration programme was not implemented by a governmental or international agency, but was a private project.<sup>5</sup>

From 1891, the JCA began to purchase unoccupied land and more than 550,000 hectares in Argentina were bought along with smaller quantities in Brazil, Canada and the United States. The price of vacant Argentinian land, due to the financial crisis in the early 1890s, was temporarily undervalued. This was highly encouraging to Baron Hirsch as Argentina was not considered to be anti-Semitic and despite the depression, the economic prospects were favourable.<sup>6</sup>

The first land acquired in Argentina was for 130 Jewish families in the Province of Santa Fé who had migrated from Russia at their own expense in 1889. *The early days of the colony were very difficult and poor living conditions and diseases resulted in the deaths of 60 children. Nevertheless, with the help of Moritz von Hirsch, within a short time the settlers had created Moisesville, the first JCA colony. More colonies were then established in the provinces of Entre Rios and Buenos Aires, and in Santiago del Estero and La Pampa at the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century.* The JCA continued to operate, even after the death of Baron Hirsch in 1896.<sup>7</sup>

Life in the agricultural colonies depended on the quality and quantity of the land. At the turn of the century, each family living in the JCA colonies obtained 250 hectares of land, where the settlers farmed. Moreover, the JCA educated the settler's children. By 1900 there were 20 schools in the colonies, teaching 1,200 pupils. The classes included Spanish, Argentinian history and Hebrew and Jewish rituals.<sup>8</sup>

The majority of Jews that arrived in Argentina were the Ashkenazi from Eastern Europe. They were strangers to Argentina in terms of speech, habits and outlook. Despite their eloquence, which suited the Argentinian life style, the Ashkenazi wanted to preserve their traditional way of life at all costs.

<sup>5</sup> T. NORMAN, *An Outstretched Arm. A History of Jewish Colonization Association*, London 1985, p. 1.

<sup>6</sup> WINSBERG, pp. 488–491.

<sup>7</sup> EHREHAUS – GARRIDO, pp. 19–25.

<sup>8</sup> NORMAN, pp. 70–74.

This stubborn attitude led to them becoming detached, not only from the Argentinians, but also their own descendants.<sup>9</sup>

On the other hand, those Jews who came to Argentina from the Middle East, such as the Sephardi of Spanish origin or the Syrian Jews, easily acclimatized. The Sephardi were accustomed to Hispanic language and traditions and the Syrian Jews were familiar with Mediterranean culture. As a result, they easily adapted to the ways of the New World.<sup>10</sup>

The Jewish community was very specific in many ways. Of particular interest was food. Jewish eating habits are still based on strict religious doctrine. When they emigrated from Europe to Argentina, the first contact with their new country was when they arrived at the *Hotel de Inmigrantes* (Immigration Hotel). The hotel offered new arrivals temporary refuge, food, and health care. Argentinians were not accustomed to preparing kosher food, so initially were unable to meet the Jewish requirements. Nevertheless, the people of Argentina came to quickly respect the culinary diversity and other religious differences.<sup>11</sup>

Many Jewish immigrants became farmers, and others moved to the cities to start careers as retailers. They traded in cheap jewellery, textiles and clothes. The more impoverished ones became street vendors or assistants. The renowned meeting place of the Jewish community, the *Once* district could be found in the capital, Buenos Aires. This was the epicentre of furriers, tailors, cobblers, restaurants serving traditional kosher food and the synagogue in the heart of the Jewish quarter. There were other *Barrios Judíos* in the city of Buenos Aires, for example *Villa Crespo*, *Almagro*, *Flores*, or *Caballito*, although it was the *Once* district that was renowned for its unmistakable atmosphere.<sup>12</sup>

At the turn of the century, Buenos Aires was a multicultural thriving city, with many advantages and disadvantages. The city had to contend with a rising crime rate, theft, homeless people, prostitution, and murders were a

---

<sup>9</sup> D. ELAZAR, *Jewish Frontier Experiences in the Southern Hemisphere: The Cases of Argentina, Australia, and South Africa*, in: *Modern Judaism*, Vol. 3, No. 2, 1983, pp. 130–135.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 134.

<sup>11</sup> E. WOLF – C. PATRIARCA, *La gran inmigración*, Buenos Aires 2007, pp. 175–176.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibidem*, pp. 179–181.

daily occurrence. For example, in 1894, the commissioner of Buenos Aires claimed there were 15,000 thieves in the city. A further source placed upon record that in 1904 there were approximately 20,000 homeless people in Buenos Aires. It is assumed that between 1887–1912, while the population tripled, crime against property and people increased sevenfold.<sup>13</sup>

The capital also had to fight organized crime, including the Jewish Mafia, from which some fascinating conclusions can be drawn. The Warsaw Jewish Mutual Aid Society was founded in the 1860s, which was a criminal gang of Jews involved in sex trafficking with its main base in Argentina. It later changed its name to Zwi Migdal, after one of its founders. Zwi Migdal was a network of Polish-Jewish traffickers, which enticed poor young women from Poland with the illusion of a better future life. The reality was of course, different and instead of a new life, the women were subjugated, maltreated and enslaved.<sup>14</sup>

This organization was the largest of this type in Argentina and at the turn of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, turned over annual revenues of 50 million dollars. The metropolis of this criminal organization was the city of Buenos Aires, where operations stretched as far as Brazil, Warsaw, South Africa, India and China in addition to several branches in mainland Argentina. For example, in the 1920s, it controlled 430 pimps and brothels and 4,000 prostitutes.<sup>15</sup>

To conclude, I must add that although there are some negative effects of Jewish immigration to Argentina, overall it was a positive phenomenon in late 19<sup>th</sup> century Argentina. Jewish farmers made substantial progress. The great emphasis that the Jewish immigrants placed on education and traditions, resulted in the Jewish farmers becoming well known for their high level of education. Farming colonies reached a peak in 1920s, and then started to decline. By the 1930s, a steady drop in the population could already be seen as many Jews, especially the young, departed for the cities.<sup>16</sup>

<sup>13</sup> L. CAIMARI, *La ciudad y el crimen. Delito y vida cotidiana en Buenos Aires 1880-1940*, Buenos Aires 2009, pp. 30–31.

<sup>14</sup> F. SPOLLANSKY, *La mafia judía en Argentina*, San Juan 2008, p. 12.

<sup>15</sup> Ibidem, pp. 12–13.

<sup>16</sup> C. SOLBERG, *Peopling the Prairies and the Pampas. The Impact of Immigration on*

### Volga Germans and Ukrainians

The fate of the Volga Germans were in many ways similar to the Jews. At the end of the 18<sup>th</sup> century, Tzarina Catherine II. published a manifesto inviting German farmers to settle in the Russian Empire, and enticing them in regard to their faith, language and culture. The main objective was to populate the Siberian steppes with European farmers to stimulate the economy. Therefore 27,000 settlers hailing from various European countries, although predominately German, settled on the steppes along the Volga River. Despite the progress made, the policy of Tsar Alexander II. resulted in the loss of the privileges granted by Catherine the Great. The knock-on effect of this was that the Germans began to emigrate to America from the 1870s. Their destinations were Canada and the United States – especially the evangelicals, while many Catholics chose Argentina, Brazil, Chile, and Uruguay. The Latin American destinations were chosen because of more lax (health) controls, less financial requirements and because they offered an agricultural future rather an industrial one, such as North America.<sup>17</sup>

The first Russo-Germans arrived in Buenos Aires in 1877. Volga German colonists were scattered throughout the pampas in small agricultural colonies in Buenos Aires, La Pampa, and particularly in Entre Ríos. These can be characterized as extremely industrious, tireless farmers with a strong relationship to the soil and their new homeland. Nevertheless, the Volga Germans also maintained their ethnic homogeneity. Unlike many Italian and Spanish farmers, they no longer intended to return to Europe and instead, bought their own farms in Argentina.<sup>18</sup>

With regard to immigration from Eastern Europe, then the Ukrainians must also be mentioned. The first Ukrainian immigrants settled in various parts of country, such as the province of Buenos Aires, and more distant provinces and territories, such as Corrientes, Mendoza, Misiones, Chaco, Formosa and Río Negro. The Ukrainians mostly became farmers, with only a few staying in the city of Buenos Aires.<sup>19</sup>

---

*Argentine and Canadian Agrarian Development, 1870–1930*, in: *Journal of Inter-American Studies and World Affairs*, Vol. 24, No. 2, 1982, pp. 155–156.

<sup>17</sup> EHREHAUS – GARRIDO, pp. 4–6.

<sup>18</sup> SOLBERG, p. 155.

<sup>19</sup> EHREHAUS – GARRIDO, pp. 31–33.

## Conclusion

From the second half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, Argentina became a focal points for the mass immigration of Europeans seeking new opportunities outside their own continent. The expanding agricultural economy, the stronger and more consolidated federal government, and the modernization of the country attracted an unprecedented number of immigrants to Argentina.

From 1871–1914, 3.2 million immigrants permanently settled in Argentina. Predominant reasons for their arrival in the country was the accessible land, the positive attitude of the government towards immigration and the level of real wages.

During my research I encountered some difficulties with resources, particularly in regard to Volga Germans and Ukrainians. Therefore, priority has been given to Jewish immigrants. As previously mentioned, the vast majority of immigrants consisted of Spaniards and Italians, although the history of smaller nations is in many ways more interesting and hitherto partially unexplored.

## Abstract

The main task of the contribution is to research the role of immigration from Eastern Europe to Argentina in the period referred to in the title. Historically, the most represented communities in the great exodus to Argentina at the turn of the 20<sup>th</sup> century were from Spain and Italy. The contribution examines both the question of the less represented nations from Europe and the social conditions, economic situation, acclimatization to a new environment and everyday life. Particular attention is focused on the issue of the Jewish immigration wave, which originally settled in fertile agricultural areas and formed an important national minority group in Argentina.

## Keywords

Immigration; Argentina; Eastern Europe; Jewish Immigration; Volga Germans